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SUBJECT: MINORITY LABEL GRATES ON SOUTHEAST TURKEY

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1. (SBU) Summary: Kurdish and Alevi community contacts grated at both recent EU and Turkish-government linked reports characterizing their respective communities as "minorities" in discussions last week with PO. The Malatya Security Director's recent warning to local media appears aimed at Sunni religious radicalism, not use of Kurdish language. Finally, contacts in Malatya, Tunceli and Diyarbakir also expressed frustration with the government's slow start in processing of the new compensation law (law 5233), criticizing new requirements for documentation of past losses which set such a high documentation threshold as to cause contacts to question the sincerity of the government's offer to compensate regional residents for their losses in the past almost twenty years of regional civil strife. They also noted that the values put on loss restitution by the new law were only fractions of those used in parallel European Court of Human Rights claims. They nevertheless welcomed the government offer, in principle, along with the recent regulations softening the sentences of already convicted PKK and other terrorist-linked prisoners as "contributing somewhat" to early momentum toward potential future regional reconciliation. End Summary.

2. (SBU) In October 24-28 meetings with PO, southeastern Turkish Alevi community contacts repeatedly cited their pre-Seljuk era penetration of eastern Anatolia over a thousand years ago and claim to almost one-third of Turkey's estimated 72 million population as proof that "Alevi's are no minority." (Comment: Judging the exact scope of Turkey's Alevi population is difficult, but estimates generally range from 15-20 percent of Turkey's population. End Comment.) Grating at both how the EU October 6 report and a recent Turkish government report labeled them as "minorities," Alevi community leaders either called for the outright dissolution of the Sunni-dominated Government Religious Affairs Ministry or its reform to include considerable funding for non-Sunni Moslem and other faiths, expressly including Jewish and Christian faith support among their demands, too.

3. (SBU) Most Alevi lay leaders and several prominent regional dedes, an Alevi religious and community leader, specifically called for: 1) government funding of cemevi's, or religious worship sites; 2) government funding of, or free provision of, utilities, as their Sunni counterparts now enjoy; 3) training seminaries for dedes; and 4) government transportation assistance to help transport their congregations to cemevi's, which by Alevi tradition and practice are more widely scattered than Sunni mosques, which are found in most neighborhoods. A minority of Alevi contacts and dedes also called for re-writing of the official Islamic history textbook used in all Turkish middle schools and elimination of the religion declaration on Turkish national identity cards. One Alevi leader, who is also a dede, said that the ideal situation would be for the Religious Affairs Ministry to "be abolished entirely, getting government out of religion entirely in Turkey, but that is not reality now. Without the Religious Affairs ministry among the radical Sunni's out there today, we would have ten times more (Turkish) Hizbullahs than we worry about now already. It just won't work not to have a Religious Affairs ministry now. We just want our fair share."

4. (SBU) While repeatedly criticizing Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's public characterization of Alevi practices as "cultural, and not (those) of a religion," some Alevi's balanced their strong criticism of the AK party's perceived Sunni discrimination toward them with observations of how local government ministry representatives were more sympathetic to their situation, even citing one pair of successive governors in one southeast province who had funneled almost 2 billion Turkish lira worth of construction materials over several years for construction of the only modern cemevi in the almost exclusively Alevi province of Tunceli.

Malatya media warning seemingly not about Kurdish tongue, but religion

5. (SBU) An early October warning to Malatya's media by the provincial security director turned out not to concern use of Kurdish in local television and radio, but rather to reflect perceived government concerns about Sunni religious radicalism. Several contacts mentioned that government security officials largely had ignored recent occasional usage of Kurdish by local radio broadcasters, but explained that the recent Security

Director's warning to media not to use non-Turkish language in broadcast media seemed to follow directly on the use of a small Malatya radio station by a "Kurdish radical Sunni group which advocated introduction of sharia (Islamic law) in Turkey, forcibly if necessary." "The timing seems like it was the Kurdish Islamic's Party's broadcast which was the problem, not the Kurdish itself which was the problem," one prominent media contact offered.

Kurdish contacts express disdain at minority label

16. (SBU) "There are twenty-five million of us. How can we be a minority?" questioned a Kurdish contact in Diyarbakir. "We want to be treated with the respect we deserve, by the government and the EU." Pressed about the specific form in which such respect would need to materialize to be satisfactory, the contact replied. "The freedom to use our language in broadcast, not a few token government broadcasts a week about subjects of their choosing. We want something like Roja and (comment: largely pro-PKK. End Comment.) Medya TV (Note: two popular Kurdish language broadcasts followed in Turkey which broadcast via satellite from outside the region. End Note.) in Turkey. We want our children to learn about Kurdish history in school, at least as an (elective) and to learn Kurdish language the same way. Turkish children should also be able to learn about these things if they want, too, in an environment free of fear and repression." These comments were echoed by many Kurdish contacts, some of whom are sending their children to the new Kurdish language schools in Diyarbakir or elsewhere to learn how to read Kurdish. However, our contacts also noted that many were not sending their children due to fear, lack of funding for private schooling or concern that government minders would note their children's attendance and exact later (comment: unspecified, but widely believed and cited. End Comment.) retribution for the perceived act of defiance.

17. (SBU) Some Kurdish print media, however, is not awaiting the outcome of the give and take on radio and television broadcast issues. PO visited a small Zaza (the Kurdish dialect common among Anatolian Alevis) publishing house in Tunceli, which started a partial Zaza weekly newspaper, Munzur Haber, with accompanying website (), several months ago. It covers Tunceli provincial news in Turkish, Zaza and Kurdish (Kermanji - the dominant Kurdish dialect in Turkey and northwestern Iraq). While it has little or no advertising base, private sources are supporting its circulation of about 2-3,000 readers for now. In Diyarbakir, there is no Kurdish language paper, but a national pro-Kurdish paper printed in Istanbul is widely sold and circulated there.

Government contacts see another side of the coin

18. (SBU) Government contacts, including several prominent governors in the region, noted that they heard regional concerns about how the "minority" label was playing poorly in the region and recognized that the GOT and the EU were going to have to "come to a meeting of the minds about what that word may mean now, something different from in the Lausanne treaty. The future will be different in how these groups are approached, but what that is we do not know yet." Nonetheless none of the regional governors knew how or when such a new understanding would be reached, frequently citing a continuing "lack of trust in each other and confidence about a shared sense of where we want to go" among EU and Turkish interlocutors on Turkey's soon-anticipated EU accession process.

19. (SBU) On language issues, one governor pointed out the multiple new (private) Kurdish language institutes in the region, but observed that their attendance is low. He attributed this phenomenon to a greater Kurdish youth desire to learn English or an EU-language than Kurdish. "One generation clings to this desire to learn Kurdish and some of their children do, too, without really knowing what they would do with it," he contended, "but in our schools, Turkish and Kurdish children demand to learn English, not Kurdish or something else. The new generation does not always seem to want what their fathers say they want." Another governor followed this line in explaining that private media broadcasting using Kurdish "is not blossoming because there is not an advertising base to support it. The government is not the problem now. There is a law saying that (the Kurdish community in Turkey) can do this, but they cannot because there is not enough advertising money for it. That is why the government official channel stepped in SUBJECT: MINORITY LABEL GRATES ON SOUTHEAST TURKEY with official broadcasters to provide some Kurdish broadcasting. Without it, there would be one to show the law was real now," he explained.

Important common denominators favoring dialogue and stability

10. (SU) With the exception of one prominent Kurdish contact who conceded his views reflect a minority of current Kurdish thinking, both Alevi and Kurdish contacts stated that their desires for broader respect and cultural recognition were being expressed within the broader framework of acceptance of a Turkish "super-identity," a further acceptance of Turkish as the

official language in Turkey and no desire to challenge Turkey's territorial integrity. The single notable exception called for Kurds in Turkey to receive "millet" status, harking back to an Ottoman administrative structure which, if translated into modern terms, likely would allow Kurds a right of self-determination and a co-equal claim to foundation of the Turkish republic. He said it would mean Kurdish and Turkish would be Turkey's official language as well, and that Kurds in southeast Turkey "largely would rule themselves like our brothers in Kurdistan in Iraq do now."

Compensation law off to a slow and contentious start

11. (SBU) Contacts in Malatya, Tunceli and Diyarbakir, especially among the bar associations and attorney groups, also expressed frustration with the government's slow start in processing of the new compensation law (law 5233), criticizing new requirements for documentation of past losses which set such a high documentation threshold as to cause contacts to question the sincerity of the government's offer to compensate regional residents for their losses in the past almost twenty years of regional civil strife. They also noted that the values put on loss restitution by the new law were only fractions of those used in parallel European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) claims. Citing a recent similar ECHR case, a Tunceli bar association representative said comparable compensation cases in Strasbourg would yield six to eight times the value of the GOT offers, but conceded that ECHR were taking three to five years to conclude. The GOT cases should finish sooner, he predicted, "so many of those seeking claims may opt to take that route. They have no funds now and the government offer is probably just what they will have to settle for."

12. (SBU) One set of contacts in Tunceli illustrated their concerns by explaining how rare documentation of civil strife was in the 1980 and 1990's era civil strife. "Much of the time, the whole government effort was to deny it was happening at all. Who would have given some villager a document about the army or village guard destruction of his home like they now want for these claim?" one bar association president rhetorically asked. In another case shown to PO which was rare to date because some documentation from the earlier era existed, an attorney produced a recently-filed claim wherein a villager whose property was burned and allegedly looted in 1994 received government village affairs documentation of his loss at a somewhat later time, which he said his client estimated to be twice or more the government stated value, but which had been refuted by the current Jandarma when recently filed. He showed PO a recent letter, under a governor's office forwarding letter, to the claims commission in which the current Jandarma claimed there had been no such alleged destruction and advocated outright dismissal of the entire claim. "This commission is just starting, so we will see," the bar association vice president offered, "but if this is what the compensation commission is going to be about it will not achieve any reconciliation or help the region get past the problems it now sees."

13. (SBU) Contacts nevertheless welcomed the government offer, in principle, along with the recent regulations softening the sentences of already convicted PKK and other terrorist-linked prisoners as "contributing somewhat" to early momentum toward regional reconciliation. Still, they said that GOT deeds would have to speak to convince skeptical regional audiences. "People see these documentation requirements (in the compensation law) as just a way to water down something that the government did just because the foreigners were leaning on them. It is up to the government now to prove it really wants to see reconciliation," another bar association president concluded.

Law not seen as boon to village return, village guard issue an obstacle

14. (SBU) Neither government nor Kurdish community contacts saw implementation of the compensation law spurring significant village return. Government officials in Tunceli and Diyarbakir noted that their provinces have developed electrical, road and water infrastructure to about half a dozen larger villages each, but did not anticipate large scale villager return despite the expected influx of capital stemming from compensation law claims. They explained that internally displaced persons already had created lives and ties elsewhere. Community contacts echoed this reasoning, but noted that the additional impediment, about which the government was perceived to be doing almost nothing, was the continuing existence of large local guard forces in most southeast rural areas. "Even with a little new money, who would want to uproot themselves and their children to go back to face armed, probably hostile local villagers who would feel threatened by your return?" one bar association contact asked rhetorically.

15. (SBU) Several governors commented on the village guard program, when asked, noted that it had its problems and was not seen as a lasting element in southeast Turkish society, but repeatedly offered that little could be done in practice about the institution of arming pro-government villagers until "the terrorists come down from the mountains and finish terrorizing

our villagers." One governor projected that, should Turkish accession to the EU occur and develop an irreversible momentum, a fairly rapid disarming of local guards in tandem with a five-year gradual phase out of local guard salaries might be "a risk that the government could afford in a broader regional stabilization initiative." He cautioned that this was unofficial thinking, but a reasonable possible future option. One government contact also touched on the related issue of the considerable role that meager village guard salaries play in southeast Turkey's almost subsistence level non-urban economy, but had few concrete ideas about what alternative revenues might replace that regional income component should the village guards be dissolved. He only made a passing reference to perhaps "something coming from EU regional development funds," but cautioned that those funds usually are devoted to infrastructure projects and that unclear change in EU common agricultural policy (CAP) funding made its applicability toward the village guard issue unclear.

16. (SBU) Comment: Discussions with contacts in the region clearly yielded deep psychological scars and sensitivities stemming from their collective perceptions of how their ethnic and religious communities have been marginalized by decades of government policy. The use of the term "minority" by the EU and the recent government-sponsored human rights board brought to the surface deeply felt and frequently bitter emotions. This may point the way toward an eventual reconciliation process both in southeast Turkey and elsewhere in the nation, but, for now, the path ahead for that progress in developing a more durable civil society seems long and likely full of many fits and starts. End Comment.

17. Baghdad minimize considered.

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